intima a journal of narrative medicine

NON-FICTION | FALL 2024

My Body, Your Body

By Lauren Reyes

This spring, I am in my first cadaver lab. When the body bag is unzipped, your every thought, joy, grief and breath might as well be reduced to a lecture. Of course, there are now short speeches to honor your life before we first meet you, the donor. They say, "It is a great privilege to learn from them" and "Think of them as your first patient." Every student nods, and they mean it. At this moment, you are the most human, human. Then we delve into your bag and what was once almost ceremonial turns into scrambling to get the best view of your innards. You become the most body, body. I wish I could ask you what you think of that.

Across many tongues, words for the body and its parts are prone to depersonalizing what they describe. We have an example right there in that sentence: "The Body." Whose is it? Of course it must belong to someone. In every utterance of "The Body," we abstract The Body from the self. "The Body" (your body) becomes a specimen, textbook and conceptual abstraction rather than physical being.

In other tongues, such as Diné Bizaad, the Navajo language, we do not often use terms for "The Body" or "The Heart." Words to describe parts of someone's body have a prefix denoting who it belongs to. "Shits'íís dóó Nits'íís" being "My body and your body." When I first learned this, my teacher emphasized the teaching to all of us. Saying "The Body" and not assigning it to someone is not part of our ways. He jokes that "isn't it disturbing to think of seeing just an arm or heart lying around without anyone to go with it?"

Your heart is beautiful though, and I want to know its every cord and valve. If I'm not supposed to be here with you, then how can I continue my path to heal? The Body is beautiful with me but my elders whom I've never met tell me that I should not be here (this is and isn't a metaphor). We do not engage with the departed. My gad [*juniper ash*] and prayer before class, as recommended by my friend's medicine man, is both protection and defensive interjection: "Hey, I'm not a bad Navajo. I'm doing my best to follow our ways. See?" If you want your body here, then I will honor that and know you are at rest. The bag of gad lives in my backpack. The once maroon fabric, now dusted with the pale gray of the ash, resembles the long-preserved flesh of your heart.

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Now let me teach you about me/us:

25% this and 33% that. Purebred racehorses, fluffy little show dogs, and NDNs with our Certificates of Indian Blood. All having to prove their lineage in pursuit of some higher power

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acknowledging (and praising) how "pure" we are. Judge or government body, they are the same.

Is my heart split between NDN and Latina? My atria are Diné [*Navajo*] but my coronaries are Mexican? I wonder which organs are from which lineage.

I know my bowels are not de España, because my small intestine lacks that precious gold they had with them all along: lactase. Maybe my stomach is Diné and my intestines are Nde [*Mescalero Apache*].

I know my eyes are my dad's.
My ears belonged to my grandma first.

I hope my legs are Diné, Nde, or Rarámuri *[Tarahumara]*. Because those ancestors of mine are the runners. They can carry me with them.

Maybe my hair is the summer heat of July that welcomes maize sprouts.
Maybe my body is three sisters stew and my blood is turquoise and gold.

Maybe when I display my entrails before you, you will know me. You will know what organs were cut from which cloth.

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Let me tell you this story (you need to know about the dove, maybe you are with her). My mom asked me to learn this Spanish song to show my grandparents that I'm celebrating my culture and *porque tu abuelos no tienen mucho tiempo aquí*. She was right. It took me years to overcome the fear that I'd butcher the beautifully strung words of the story. Not everyone can sing this song (it belongs to Beltrán) both vocally and (in my case) if *tú español es así así*. But I wanted to tell the story of *la paloma y su esposo para mi familia*.

They say during the night, he does not eat, he only drinks and cries out for her. They say that the sky itself trembles to hear his weeping. How he suffered for her, that even in dying he called for her. They say a sad dove would come to him early every morning and sing to him. They swear that the dove is nothing but her soul, waiting.

Cucurrucucú. Cucurrucucú. She sings. (Don't cry)
The stones, dove, what do they know about love?
Cucurrucucú. Cucurrucucú.
Dove, don't cry anymore.[1]

I know of that love because of how my heart aches as I edit this piece and listen to that song knowing that my tata is no longer here to read this when I'm finished. Our family could not

[1] Méndez, Tomás. "Cururrucucú Paloma." Translated and modified for manuscript by Lauren R. Reyes. 1954.

give him up to the students as yours did. We surrendered him to the earth this summer instead. Donor, in your family's grief, did they at least have the hope of teaching the next generation through your sacrifice?

My body does not belong to me (neither does yours), and that is ok. Mine is a reflection of every face who came before me, and a gift to those who come after me. Yours is a gift to us students and a vessel for your every life experience. Mine is dedicated to the people who've raised me and those who've raised them and those whose faces are forgotten. Yours is dedicated to medical knowledge, that stepping stone towards healing in the Western way.

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No one will write about my body (but maybe your body?). So I will write about it and keep writing until you're sick of my obsidian teeth, cornsilk guts, and prickly pear heart. Even then, what will you know about me or us or them? I can paint myself in extravagant metaphors over and over again just as I've done here. I can condense every life and story I've lived into simple prose.

My heart beats louder than that, though. My blood (every part of it) rushes through the canyons of my atria and ventricles. It reaches my lungs and instead of oxygen, is given hope from my mom, resilience from my grandma and love from my ancestors. How will you hold it? How will you hear it beating away? This isn't a cry or fight or challenge to you, just what is. Just an ask. I know it isn't fair, you never got the chance to see mine anyways. Yet, here I am, knuckles deep into your aorta.

You lay still. Do you know your body? (let alone mine) It is beautiful with me. Your body, your body, is beautiful with me. Ahéhee'. 'Ixehe. Gracias.

Lauren Reyes is a Human Biology student at Stanford University who plans to pursue a medical career in cardiology, surgery or pediatrics. She is passionate about culturally-driven medical care for her Latine and Native American communities. Additionally, she enjoys writing poetry, creative essays and short stories relating to wellness and culture.